

# Hope Defined

Believers find hope for life only in God.

I served as a combat infantryman during the Vietnam War. During this time, I often heard fellow soldiers in the field utter a particular expression of hopelessness. The saying reflected their attitude of futility about the constant, daily prospect of enemy attacks resulting in chaos, severe injury, and death. This attitude became vividly real to me one day as I stared silently at a pair of boots extending from beneath a soldier's motionless poncho—a poncho now serving as the man's shroud. The dead soldier's closest buddy saw my empty stare, edged up beside me, and muttered matter-of-factly, "It don't mean nothing!"

As I think back on this experience, which is still not easy to do after fifty years, the despair of the saying still shocks me. If true, it meant the soldier's death in battle was void of any real meaning. Further, the statement implied that the soldier's life (or, for that matter, any soldier's life) had no significance. The world was no better or worse while the person lived. It was no better or worse now that the person was gone.

Tragically, this kind of thinking can also be found in everyday life. As a pastor for more than thirty years, I have conducted many funerals. The lifespans of the deceased individuals ranged from an infant who lived only fifteen minutes beyond birth to a woman who lived to be more than a hundred years old. While each case was unique, I have observed a few tangible facts. One relates to the relationship of the deceased individual to Christ. In cases in which the deceased people were fervent believers, their families typically coped better than cases where no Christian faith was evident. Christian relatives grieved the absence of their loved one, yet they also exhibited hope for a future reunion. This hope was a deep-seated belief, not merely wishful thinking.

Human beings need a sense of hope if they are to deal with all of life's troubles, including the reality of death. We need hope that we can get well if we become sick. We need hope that we can find a new job if we become unemployed. We need hope that we can make friends to combat loneliness. In this session, we will address Job's yearning for hope from God to find meaning even in the midst of his devastating personal catastrophes.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## **JOB 2:11–14:22**

Job 1:1–2:10 first presents a brief introduction of the righteous man Job and his family (1:1-5), followed by the account of a series of crippling, Satan-caused disasters that stripped Job of all his worldly blessings—including his ten children—and left him as a broken man sitting alone in a heap of ashes, scraping his boil-pocked skin with pottery shards (1:6–2:8). Yet even when Job’s wife suggested a fatal route out of his suffering, Job did not sin by speaking falsely about God (2:9-10).

In 2:11-13, the biblical writer introduced three friends who purported to come to Job’s side to comfort him. Very little is known about the backgrounds of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Eliphaz is called “the Temanite,” which probably means that he came from Teman, a city in Edom (see Ezek. 25:13; Amos 1:11-12). Bildad is referred to as “the Shuhite,” which may identify him as a member of a group of nomadic Arameans. Zophar is called “the Naamathite,” likely referring to a region in northwest Arabia.

Job 2:11-13 sets the stage for the longest section (by far) in the Book of Job, chapters 3–41, in which a series of poetic speeches by Job, the three friends, a man named Elihu, and finally the Lord Himself focuses on Job’s plight and God’s sovereign role in ruling over His creation in general and human endeavors (especially Job’s situation) in particular. Job 3:1–14:22 covers Job’s opening speech of depressing gloom (3:1-26), followed by the first of three rounds, or cycles, of dialogue by the friends and Job (4:1–14:22).

Theologically, Job’s three friends adhered to a rigid doctrine of retributive justice that assumed all experiences of suffering were divine judgment against a person’s sinfulness. Conversely, all prosperity and worldly success automatically signified a person’s righteousness. Thus, the catastrophes that struck down Job were indisputable proof to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar that Job had committed some grievous sin against God.

The theme of the first cycle of dialogue (4:1–14:22) centers on the nature of God. Eliphaz spoke first (4:1–5:27). He asserted that God is holy. Therefore Job surely had sinned, and God was reprimanding him. If Job repented, God would surely bless him again. In response to Eliphaz, Job steadfastly maintained his innocence (6:1–7:6). In defending himself against Eliphaz’s accusations, Job took a real step of faith. He ceased to speak to Eliphaz and instead spoke directly to God (7:7-21).

Bildad spoke next. He described God as just (8:1-22). Therefore, Bildad concluded that Job should repent and allow God to restore him to his former glory. Job found no comfort in Bildad’s discourse either; he insisted that God

was not treating him fairly (9:1-32). Yet, as Job reflected on the impossibility of a man contending with God, Job took a second step of faith. He longed for a mediator between himself and God (9:33). At the end of the speech, however, Job again sank into despair, pleading for God to leave him alone (9:34–10:22).

Zophar spoke last (11:1-20). He asserted that God is all-wise. Thus, Zophar also rebuked Job for claiming innocence and demanded that Job repent. Job resented his friends' accusations but recognized that God's power was too great for him to overturn. Job continued to defend himself, concluding that one day God would regret treating him unjustly. (12:1–14:22).

## EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

### **QUESTIONS** (Job 14:1-6)

Job reflected on the brevity of life and reality of judgment awaiting all people. This judgment is well-deserved, since all human beings are impure. Job pleaded for God to leave him alone so that he could gain some type of relief from pain during his remaining time.

### **VERSE 1**

#### **Anyone born of woman is short of days and full of trouble.**

In his speech in chapter 11, Zophar criticized Job for babbling on about his innocence. Then, like a prosecutor, Zophar methodically tried to discredit the points Job had made about God's ways being unfair. He accused Job of scoffing at God and of thinking that he (Job) could understand God's ways or discover God's limits (see 11:4-6). Zophar further recommended that if only Job would change his attitude, pray, and repent, then he would undoubtedly forget his suffering and find peace once more (see 11:13-18).

Beginning in chapter 12, Job refuted Zophar's charges, insisting that he was fully aware of the so-called wisdom being espoused by the three friends (see 12:1-3; 13:1-2). What they were not taking into consideration, however, was Job's self-awareness. Job knew that he had not sinned—at least not to the extent that he deserved such a level of suffering. Or if he had unwittingly done something so terrible, would it not be only fair for God to reveal what Job had done? Job insisted that he was willing to risk God's taking his life in order to defend himself before the Lord (see 13:14-15).

By the opening verse of chapter 14, Job had descended into despondency and questioned life itself. The phrase **anyone born of woman** points to the frailty of human life and the vast difference between God and mankind.

The phrase contains both pity and scorn for the human condition. Until the advent of modern medical procedures, childbirth could be a particularly dangerous time for both expectant mothers and their unborn children. Babies that survived childbirth then faced many other challenges as they grew toward adulthood. Job described the typical lifespan of humans as being **short of days** (“of few days,” KJV; NIV) **and full of trouble**. Consequently, Job lamented that people are so insignificant they do not deserve the degree of scrutiny God had given to him.

## VERSE 2

**He blossoms like a flower, then withers; he flees like a shadow and does not last.**

Job compared the relative brevity of human life first to **a flower** and then to **a shadow**. Then and now, rainfall in the region where Job lived is limited and inconsistent. The rains that come to the region usually are limited to two brief seasons, the so-called early rains in March and April and latter rains in October and November. During these two periods moisture gets picked up from the Mediterranean Sea through evaporation, and winds sweep the rain-laden clouds eastward across the arid landscape. Seeds long buried in the rocky, sandy soil sprout and blossom quickly. Then almost as quickly, the air currents shift, funneling hot, dry air westward off of the Arabian Desert. Plants once decked in flowers soon wither, turn brown, and die. Job saw in the brief span of a plant’s life a depressing portrait of the human lifespan.

The comparison of human life to *a shadow* may emphasize not only life’s brevity but also its apparent fleeting purpose. Shadows exist only during the daytime, when the sun is shining. Moreover, shadows lengthen and shorten as the sun’s angle changes throughout the day. But what is a shadow? It is only a reflection of a person’s silhouetted form; it has no real, lasting substance. Today’s shadow disappears as quickly as it appears, leaving no trace. At this moment, Job felt the same was true, relatively speaking, about human life.

## VERSE 3

**Do you really take notice of one like this? Will you bring me into judgment against you?**

God’s concern for and attention to Job’s life bewildered Job. To be sure, he did not consider himself to be incapable of sin. His regular practice of offering purification sacrifices for his children after their banquets (see 1:5) shows that he understood the sinful nature of all humanity, including himself. At the same time, Job was faithfully devoted to the Lord and sought daily to turn away from evil. Why would the Lord suddenly **bring Job into**

**judgment** as an adversary? What had prompted the God of the universe to zero in and **take notice of one like** Job—“a man of complete integrity” (1:1)? Job felt that God’s scrutiny was unfairly focused on him. The Hebrew term rendered *judgment* entailed not only the judicial examination but also the subsequent punishment. Herein lay the problem for Job. He knew of no evil in his life that was deserving of such harsh punishment from God.

#### VERSE 4

### **Who can produce something pure from what is impure? No one!**

The Hebrew word rendered **pure** typically refers in the Old Testament to ritual purity. Job may have emphasized here a deeper sense of the concept of purity: humanity’s pervasive sin nature. The emphatic phrase “**No one!**” stresses the impossibility of producing something pure from that which is impure.

On the other hand, God is unique. He alone can do what is impossible for human beings to do. For example, when Abraham and Sarah doubted that they could give birth to a child in their old age, the Lord asked them, “Is anything impossible for the LORD?” (Gen. 18:14). The question was rhetorical, because the answer was no. With God, nothing is impossible. This was the same truth the angel Gabriel asserted to Mary when revealing to her that she would give birth to the Messiah—the One who would make pure the impure by providing forgiveness of sins (see Luke 1:37).

In his time and dire circumstances, however, Job did not yet foresee such a possibility. He felt that it was not fair to expect any human being to be sin-free. Nevertheless, he also did not think he had committed such grievous sins as to deserve the bitter loss of his entire household.

#### VERSE 5

### **Since a person’s days are determined and the number of his months depends on you, and since you have set limits he cannot pass,**

The two phrases **a person’s days** and **the number of his months** designate measurable periods of time in an individual’s existence. Thus, these phrases epitomize the finiteness of human life. The Hebrew verb translated **are determined** can also mean “to cut” or “to sharpen.” Its usage in Job 14:5 thus arises from the practice of cutting, or engraving, decrees in stone. Once engraved in stone, a decree cannot be easily changed. The noun rendered **limits** derives from a verb that is synonymous with the verb rendered *are determined*. Therefore, both words in this context emphasize the unalterable nature of human mortality. It is set in stone, so to speak.

Job correctly attributed to God both the brevity of life and the impossibility of extending the human lifespan beyond His decreed limits. As Creator, God alone controlled the design of creation. The introduction of sin into human existence corrupted His intention for life, resulting in humanity's experience of physical death. Consequently, God limited the length of human life (see Gen. 6:3; Ps. 90:10). Once God set this limit, humanity was bound by it. Further, only God could one day overrule the power of physical death. He did this when Jesus the Son of God died on the cross, was buried, and then was raised on the third day (see 1 Cor. 15:20-22)!

## VERSE 6

**look away from him and let him rest so that he can enjoy his day like a hired worker.**

Job's pain and despair moved him to utter a sorrowful plea. He entreated God to **look away from him and let him rest**. Succumbing to Satan's whispered accusations against God, Job began to imagine that his suffering would become more manageable if only God left him alone or decided to pick on someone else. It seems that Job had concluded he would never again enjoy the blessings of his former life. He would be content, however, just to be able to **enjoy his day like a hired worker** ("a hired hand," ESV; "a hired laborer," NIV). Such a laborer expected to work hard even in tough conditions for barely enough pay to live on, yet the worker also expected to have time in the evenings to rest, eat, and sleep. Job longed for God to give him even a brief respite from his constant, unexplained suffering.

---

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Suffering" on pages 1510–1511 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is a proper goal for believers in suffering if it is not to eliminate suffering? How have you experienced God's help in times of suffering?

## DESPAIR (Job 14:7-12)

Job compared human life to a tree, noting the finality of death for humans. Several considerations shape Job's words in this passage. First, Job is brokenhearted. Second, God's complete revelation in Scripture was not available to Job. Third, Job was speaking at the same time that he was processing what had taken place. He had not yet reached his final conclusion.

## VERSE 7

**There is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its shoots will not die.**

Job continued to look for insight in other parts of God's creation—in this case, **a tree**. Job knew from experience that when a tree **is cut down**, new **shoots** often **sprout again** from the stump. If God designed trees in this way, why would He not give human beings such **hope** as well?

In later biblical prophecy this phenomenon was applied to the promised Messiah (see Isa. 11:1). In that prophetic context, the idea of a tree's being cut down and later sprouting new growth foreshadowed the destruction of Jerusalem and the covenant nation. After a period of time, however, the punished people of God would be restored and the covenant nation would take root again.

In Job 14:7, however, Job reflected on the phenomenon and became depressed. He limited his vision to the literal sprouting of the plant. Both a literal and figurative interpretation of the phenomenon should encourage hope. After a tree is toppled, it appears to be dead and gone. But it can sprout new life in the stump. Job, though suffering mightily, was not destroyed. Just as a stump's new sprouts foretell of a future existence for the tree, the message to Job was that his future could be better than he assumed. In his present state of depression, however, this hope evaded Job.

## VERSES 8-9

**If its roots grow old in the ground and its stump starts to die in the soil, the scent of water makes it thrive and produce twigs like a sapling.**

Job continued to talk about the hope that characterized a fallen tree. During the dry season the **stump** would begin to decay. **Its roots**—especially those near the surface of the ground—would start drying up as well. All appearances of life would vanish. However, when even **the scent of water** returned to the air in the rainy season, the stump's deepest roots would respond. Renewed moisture would cause the stump to **thrive and produce** new shoots. The old stump would act **like a sapling** again. In his reflections about the tree, Job harbored a thorny question about why God would not relent in His harsh punishment against one who served Him faithfully.

## VERSE 10

**But a person dies and fades away; he breathes his last—where is he?**

Job starkly contrasted the fate of human beings in death to a tree's restoration after being cut down. His statement that **a person dies and fades away** ("wasteth away," KJV; "is laid low," ESV; NIV) is packed with despondency. In the Hebrew text, the word rendered *person* ("man," KJV; "a man," ESV; NIV) is not the general term for humankind. Rather, it is the term that usually denotes a male at the peak of his powers. Furthermore, the grammatical construction of the sentence makes the word emphatic. Thus, Job emphasized that even the strongest and healthiest human being could not escape death. The verb rendered *fades away* means "to become weak or prostrate." At death, all signs of life disappear and never return.

The question **where is he** is ambiguous. The same Hebrew word denotes wind, breath, and spirit. In ancient Hebrew thought, when the breath ceased to come from the throat, the spirit had departed and the person was dead. But like the wind (see John 3:8), no one could see where the spirit went. Hence, the question may hint that Job had not lost all hope. To be sure, he was acknowledging such understanding was far beyond him—and beyond his friends' understanding too!

## VERSES 11-12

**As water disappears from a lake and a river becomes parched and dry, so people lie down never to rise again. They will not wake up until the heavens are no more; they will not stir from their sleep.**

Job changed figures of speech to one more suitable to his despondency. The lack of significant rainfall in the Middle East during the dry seasons caused many rivers and streams to dry up. As their water evaporated, the scorching sunshine baked the exposed riverbeds. Soon, apart from a **parched** riverbed, the once flowing waterway became identical to the surrounding terrain.

Like the example of the tree stump, however, Job's analogy of a dry riverbed contained a paradox. At death, human beings, like the water in a seasonal stream, disappeared without a trace. However, the water would return with the rainy season and once again fill the riverbed with precious liquid. This description left the door open for hope.

Perhaps recognizing the weakness in his verbal pictures, Job stated his observation that death for humans was final and permanent. People who died would **not wake up until the heavens are no more**. Viewing death as a final state for humans can lead to despair. It removes all hope.

The comparison of death to **sleep** in time became the perfect imagery for the Christian perspective of death. When a believer dies, he or she steps into the presence of the resurrected Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:8). Death for believers may be lying down to rest, but the resurrection is waking up to live forever!



---

## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Resurrection” on pages 1348–1349 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you describe the difference between resuscitation and resurrection?

### HOPE (Job 14:13-14)

Job characterized death as a place to escape suffering. He expressed a longing for life after death, realizing that such a future life would come only through God’s sovereign action.

### VERSE 13

**If only you would hide me in Sheol and conceal me until your anger passes. If only you would appoint a time for me and then remember me.**

Job’s despondent reflections about the finality of death for human beings seemed to open his mind ever so slightly to a hopeful thought. If God created human beings out of nothing in the beginning, and if He is indeed sovereign over life and death, then wouldn’t it be possible for God to give His people some form of life after death? Job essentially admitted that his lack of insight about the afterlife left room for a ray of hope—a wish introduced by the two words **if only** (“O that,” KJV; “Oh that,” ESV).

The first half of Job’s hopeful thought was that the Lord might **hide** Job **in Sheol** (“the grave,” KJV; NIV) **and conceal** him there until God’s **anger** passed. The Hebrew concept of *Sheol* is a challenge to translate and comprehend. The linguistic background of the term is uncertain; thus, it has been variously translated as “the underworld,” “the grave,” “the pit,” and “hell.” Job’s usage of the term clearly supports the understanding that *Sheol* was considered to be the place of the dead. What Job began to consider, however, was the hopeful thought that death and the grave might not be the end of a person’s existence. Indeed, Job wondered if death—for him at least—might be a hiding place of sorts, a haven where he might finally be shielded from further suffering. Of course, this would be true only if the second part of Job’s hopeful thought came to pass.

The second half of Job’s hope (also introduced by the words **if only**) also involved actions that only the Lord could do. Job hoped that God would **appoint a time** for him and then **remember** him. Job believed what King David later expressed about the Lord in Psalm 139:16: “Your eyes saw me

when I was formless; all my days were written in your book and planned before a single one of them began.” In other words, Job believed that God controlled not just time but the events that occur within time. The Hebrew word translated *time* in Job 14:13 refers to a specific, fixed time—an appointed time in which Job could appear before the Lord to defend himself.

Such a meeting required not only an appointed time but also the Lord’s remembering Job. The Hebrew term translated *remember* involves more than a mental recollection; it includes taking redemptive or restorative action. This kind of action is vividly portrayed in the New Testament when one of the criminals crucified alongside Jesus asked the Lord to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom. Jesus replied that the man would be with Him that day in paradise (see Luke 23:43).

#### VERSE 14

**When a person dies, will he come back to life? If so, I would wait all the days of my struggle until my relief comes.**

This verse reveals that Job was struggling with one of humanity’s deepest questions: Is there life after death? Many centuries later, the apostle Paul dealt with the same question as it related to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He wrote to believers in Corinth, “If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone” (1 Cor. 15:19).

Job did not have the benefit of looking back on the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the gospel’s answer to his deep struggle. Nevertheless, Job dared to consider—even if just for a moment—that God might somehow enable a person to **come back to life** after death. Everything Job knew about life and death to that point argued against such a possibility. However, if God made some distinction in death between righteous people and evil people, then Job professed that he was prepared to **wait all the days of his struggle** for his **relief** (“change,” KJV; “renewal,” ESV; NIV) to come.

For God’s people in the Old Testament who looked forward to Christ as well as for believers today who point back to Him, the New Testament affirms that there is life after death. Eternal life comes through faith in Jesus Christ, who defeated death and the grave through the cross and resurrection.

---

### EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Job 13:15. How does this verse help you understand the true nature of genuine faith? How does it give you hope about God’s promises to His people?